

Can performance brands cause a placebo effect?

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Credit: University of Notre Dame

From the middle-school child considering the premier brands of soccer shoes, to the college graduate weighing which graduate test prep course to take, a common marketing message from consumer brands is "you will perform better with us."

In a new study, Frank Germann, of the Department of Marketing in the University of Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, and colleagues Aaron Garvey of the University of Kentucky and Lisa Bolton of Penn State University examine if such [performance](#) brands can cause a [placebo effect](#).

"Superior materials, craftsmanship, design or other components of the

product can certainly help performance in some cases," Germann said. "However, in our research, we hold the product constant and instead examine whether the mere belief that a particular brand is effective at enhancing performance can actually improve performance objectively."

The researchers conducted several experiments to determine if there is a placebo effect. In one study, they invited participants to take part in a market research study about a new golf putter.

"Specifically, we asked the participants to complete putts on a putting green from three predefined locations with the new prototype putter," Germann said. "Moreover, about half of the participants were told that they would be putting with a Nike putter, a strong performance brand, whereas the other half of participants were not told what putter brand they would be using. Importantly, all participants used the exact same putter."

In another study, the researchers invited participants to take part in a math test.

"The participants were also told that they would be wearing a pair of foam ear plugs during the math test to minimize distractions and improve concentration," Germann said. "Each participant again received the exact same ear plugs; however, about half of the participants were told that the ear plugs were made by 3M, a strong performance brand, whereas the other half did not know who made the ear plugs."

Although all participants used the same golf putter, those who thought that it was a Nike golf putter on average needed significantly fewer putts to sink the golf ball. Likewise, although every participant used the same ear plugs, those who thought that the ear plugs were made by 3M got significantly more questions right.

"Our results indicate that strong performance brands can cause an effect that is akin to a placebo effect," Germann said. "Our results also suggest that the use of a strong performance brand causes participants to feel better about themselves when undertaking a task—that is, to have greater task-specific self-esteem. This higher self-esteem lowers their performance anxiety which, in turn, leads to the better performance outcomes."

The researchers found that not everyone benefits equally from the performance brand placebo. The effect is strongest among people who are novices in the respective task, such as golf putting or math tests, whereas experts receive little or no boost.

"People who are inexperienced have more self-doubts and performance anxiety that the brand helps to alleviate, whereas experts already have high task-specific self-esteem and low performance anxiety when undertaking the task," Germann said.

The researchers also found that simply being prestigious is not enough for a brand to elicit a placebo effect.

"The brand needs to be perceived as capable of improving performance in a given task," Germann said. "For example, we found that [participants](#) who were told that they were going to putt with a Gucci putter, a prestigious brand but not a performance brand, did not do better than those who did not know about the brand of the putter, while those using the Nike putter performed better than both groups."

Germann said that the results indicate that performance brands can improve consumers' athletic as well as cognitive performance. The results also suggest brand managers should emphasize the performance characteristics of their brands and position their brands on relevant performance dimensions.

"Ironically, our studies also indicate that consumers do not typically credit the brand with the performance gain, but rather themselves," Germann said. "This finding provides an interesting paradox for brand managers who would likely desire some of the credit for the benefit their brands provide to consumers."

The study will appear in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. It can be found here:

<http://jcr.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2015/12/28/jcr.ucv094>.

More information: Aaron M. Garvey et al. Performance Brand Placebos: How Brands Improve Performance and Consumers Take the Credit, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2015). DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucv094

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